



Lee, C. A. (2019). 'I ain't no clue, but we learned it yesterday': Losing our way with the Year 6 grammar, punctuation and spelling test. *Forum*, 61(3), 401-414. <https://doi.org/10.15730/forum.2019.61.3.401>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):  
[10.15730/forum.2019.61.3.401](https://doi.org/10.15730/forum.2019.61.3.401)

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# “I ain’t no clue, but we learned it yesterday”: a Discussion of the Year 6 Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling Test.

CLAIRE LEE

**ABSTRACT** In 2012, head teachers responded to the proposed new year 6 Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling test (commonly known as the SPaG or GPS test) with warnings of curriculum narrowing, teaching to tests, and misery for pupils and families. Despite head teachers’ opposition to the test, seven cohorts of year 6 pupils have now taken it. This article considers the head teachers’ warnings in the light of evidence from recent ethnographic fieldwork with Year 5 and 6 children in an English primary school. The history and rationale behind the introduction of the test are discussed. It is then suggested that the emphasis on teaching the concepts and terminology required for success in the GPS test intersects with schools’ accountability mechanisms, leading in some settings to the teaching of formulaic writing that has little to do with meaning, creativity, purpose or audience.

## Introduction

One of many controversial moves by Michael Gove in his tenure as Secretary of State for Education was the introduction in 2012-13 of a new statutory test for year 6 pupils in England: the Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling (GPS) test. Head teachers opposed it, warning of ‘further narrowing of the curriculum, teaching to the tests and increased misery for our year six students and their families already sick of a diet of practice SATs and drills’ (BBC News, 2012) and voted overwhelmingly to disrupt the ‘flawed’ examination. Yet the test, informally known as SPaG (Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar), has now been taken by seven cohorts of children. In this article I consider the head teachers’ warnings in the light of evidence from my recent ethnographic fieldwork with year 5 and 6 participants in an English primary school. I start with a short discussion of the history and rationale behind the GPS test. Drawing on fieldwork data, I then suggest that the teaching of decontextualised grammatical concepts and terminology required for success in the test intersects with schools’ accountability mechanisms, leading in some settings to the teaching of formulaic writing that has little to do with meaning, creativity, purpose or audience.

To illustrate the format and content of the test, below are five questions from the 2019 paper<sup>1</sup>.

What kind of **clause** is underlined in the sentence below?

If they could afford to, the ancient Romans ate well.

What is the grammatical term for the underlined words in the sentence below?

The new paintbrushes are in the box.

Circle the correct word in each box to complete the sentences in **Standard English**.

Pass me 

|       |
|-------|
| them  |
| those |

 cartons, please.

You sang that song very 

|       |
|-------|
| good. |
| well. |

We always 

|      |
|------|
| did  |
| done |

 our homework on time.

Rewrite the sentence below in the **passive**.  
Remember to punctuate your answer correctly.

The wind damaged the fence.

Insert **two commas** and a **semi-colon** in the correct places in the passage below.

Last Wednesday we performed a play at school I invited my parents to come and watch. When I first went on stage I was so nervous that I nearly forgot my lines.

**“Why do we have to learn all this stuff?” Finlay<sup>2</sup>**  
**(age 10, looking at a GPS paper)**

As an experienced primary school teacher and literacy subject leader when the GPS test was introduced, I struggled to answer Finlay’s question honestly. Should I say it was a political move, pandering to a nostalgic “back-to-basics” agenda? That, with clear right/wrong answers, it was expedient, enabling easy, quick – and therefore cheap – marking

of SATs papers? Or the approved line, that it would help him write more effectively? In the end I answered carefully that it can be useful to be able to talk about language and how we use it, and that the government had decided the GPS test was a good way to teach this to children. Finlay's seemingly simple question points to a complex set of motives behind what was, and remains, a contested examination.

A common misconception is that grammar was neither taught nor tested in primary schools before the GPS test, a myth Gove (2010) chose not to refute: 'Under this government we will insist that our exams, once more, take proper account of the need to spell, punctuate and write a grammatical sentence'. Yet grammar was a key element of the literacy national curriculum<sup>3</sup>, assessed within the pre-2013 year 6 writing test. Undoubtedly this test was due for reform by 2010. It was notoriously unreliable, difficult to mark and stressful for children (Bew, 2011). Gove's strategy was to use the overhaul of the test to reassert a traditional approach to teaching grammar; an ideological about-turn in literacy education.

The pre-2013 grammar curriculum was based on the rationale that grammar teaching 'is not simply the naming of parts of speech, nor is it to provide arbitrary rules for 'correct' English. It is about making children aware of key grammatical principles and their effects, to increase the range of choices open to them when they write' (Department for Education and Employment, 2000, p.7). In accordance with a well-established body of knowledge about the socially constructed nature of language and the social activity of meaning-making in the real world (e.g. Bakhtin, 1986), the curriculum emphasised writing appropriately for audience and purpose. Its approach also aligns with evidence suggesting that grammar teaching does improve children's writing abilities when embedded within a holistic approach to the teaching of writing (Myhill, Jones, Lines & Watson, 2012). All this seems perfectly compatible with Gove's (2010) statement 'it is every child's right to be taught how to communicate clearly'.

Contrast this, then, with the exam questions above and the assertion, made without reference to evidence or theory: 'It is important that pupils learn the correct grammatical terms in English' (Department for Education, 2013, p.5). "Naming of parts" and rules for "correct" English now feature largely in the primary English curriculum, despite evidence that teaching grammar in isolation has no positive effect on children's writing ability (Clark, 2010). The reinstatement of grammar studied as an end in itself, rather than as a means to effective communication, has been described as 'an egregious example of non-evidence-based policy' (Sullivan & Wyse, 2016) and one that 'turns the clock back half a century' (Crystal, 2013).

A recognition that every instance of communication is unique requires us to teach children to use language flexibly and creatively. Instead, the GPS model attaches value to "standard" English – a genre associated with economic prosperity, power and the white middle classes. Thus it rewards those children whose home language resembles this. When we consider that privileging some ways of using language over others reproduces inequalities (Cope, Kalantzis & Smith, 2018), we must recognise the danger in teaching children to do so. A sophisticated understanding of meaning-making also necessitates curricula and pedagogies that reflect both our increasingly multilingual, globally-connected and technologically-enabled communications environment and our changing roles and activities within it (Kalantzis & Cope, 2015). Rather than being treated as blank slates to be filled with

grammatical terminology, children require rich and authentic opportunities to develop as critical users, designers and makers of meaning.

Some might argue that teaching English in a creative, meaningful and holistic way is not incompatible with success in the GPS test. Yet this argument ignores the powerful perverse incentives: ‘Manufacture a type of test that espouses your values, make it high stakes and teachers will have to teach to that test’ (Marshall, 2017, p.33). When tests operate as accountability mechanisms, schools need children to score highly. This is guaranteed most easily through coaching.

For high marks in the GPS test, children must memorise forty to fifty grammatical terms<sup>4</sup> (defined by the testers and not always in accordance with educated usage; see Crystal, 2013), and use them to parse sentences, a skill that requires repeated practice with varied examples; in other words, drills. This discourages teaching with authentic, meaningful and purposeful texts written for a real audience. Safford (2016) describes an increase since 2012-13 of decontextualized grammar teaching, daily GPS lessons, lengthy test preparation and the use of past papers as teaching materials. Learning specialist terminology undoubtedly appeals to some children (Bell, 2016), but this is a poor argument for diverting time and resources to teach or test it. Debra Myhill, a contributor to the 2012-13 grammar curriculum, argues that the GPS test serves ‘no valid educational purpose’ (Centre for Research in Writing, 2016) and should be discontinued.

I turn now to the everyday enactment of GPS in classrooms and its effects on children and teachers and their use and understanding of language. I present data from my recent 14-month ethnographic research investigating the learning lives of eight children aged 9-11 in an English primary school. These children come from armed forces families. While the main focus of the participatory project is how the children wish to be understood and cared for in school, I have learned a great deal about many aspects of their lives, including testing and the GPS curriculum. Some of the data presented here come from classroom observation; others are visual artefacts created by my participants and quotations from recorded discussions.

### **“I ain’t no clue, but we learnt it yesterday” (Ella, age 11)**

These are the words of one of my research participants in the autumn term of year 6. Ella has drawn a representation of her spare time activities (see figure 1), and we are discussing it. I have noticed an odd word in her spelling list.

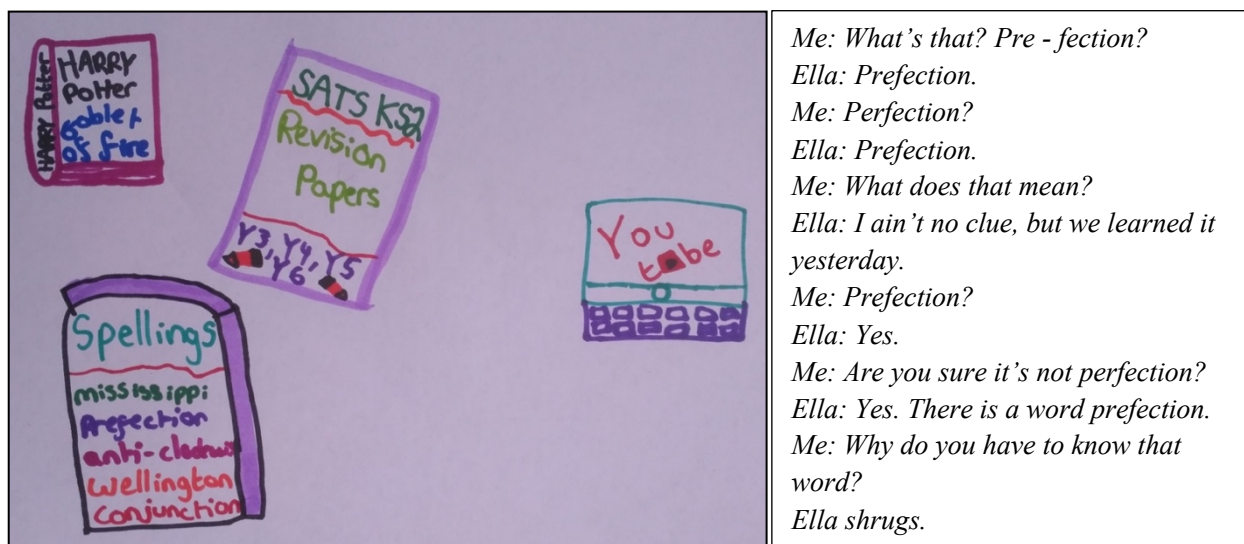


Figure 1

Ella presents herself in two contrasting ways here and indeed throughout the research. On the one hand, she is highly invested in her SATs. In October, seven months before the tests, Ella tells me she already spends her evenings revising with past papers and worksheets. Her picture of the revision papers suggests she has been using these since year 3. She tells me she is keen to get “*really good scores*”, to have “*a better chance of getting into a better school*”. Portraying herself as an enthusiastic user of literacies, she talks frequently of keeping up to date with news and popular culture through YouTube, radio news and TV. She includes a Harry Potter book in her design, and talks eagerly about reading for enjoyment and adventure: “*I'm in a book and it's about Hong Kong. They say if you read a book, then you're in that place. So I'm in Hong Kong*”. Her picture and her words suggest that Ella privileges literacy over other aspects of the curriculum. In the future, she says, she might combine her enjoyment of writing with her love of food and become a food critic.

On the other hand, Ella shows no curiosity about the meaning of the word “prefection”, or even a recognition that it is probably a misspelling. A statutory requirement in the English curriculum is that pupils use their prior knowledge of root words, prefixes and suffixes to make sense of new words they encounter (Department for Education, 2013). An investigatory approach to language would encourage Ella to consider what “pre” and “fection” mean separately, examine the word in context, and establish its meaning for that context. Ella has not done this, but has simply included “prefection” in a list of decontextualised words with no semantic connection. This suggests that learning to spell them is an exercise in itself: these words are “spellings”, rather than resources for communication. Learning spelling lists out of context also teaches children that their meanings are fixed and unrelated to their situations of use, a view that is theoretically flawed: ‘The meaning of a word is determined entirely by its context. In fact, there are as many meanings of a word as there are contexts of its usage’ (Vološinov, 1973, p.123). Ella neither knows nor cares what “prefection” means: it matters little because she is not trying to make sense of a text in which the word occurs. Her only reason for learning it is for the spelling test.

Ella’s shrug and her interesting use of code-switching – “*ain't no clue*” – suggest a certain resistance or irreverence towards the “correct” language promoted in the GPS curriculum. Given that Ella often corrects other children’s grammar – telling another child

*“specialler”* is *“not even a word”*, for example – this is clearly intentional. Ella’s indifference here contrasts strongly with another occasion, when she asks the other children in the research group if they have learned a structure her teacher calls *“tell-prove-prove”* sentences<sup>5</sup>. She spends considerable time teaching the others how to use these to build atmosphere in a story, explaining how to punctuate them and providing examples. Describing them as *“genius”*, Ella clearly recognises the value of these structures as part of her communicative repertoire. The meta-language she uses – *“tell-prove-prove”* – also makes sense to her, going beyond the recall of terminology for its own sake. This suggests that Ella’s teacher supplements the GPS curriculum with alternative, common-sense ways of teaching structures children can use in their writing. Ella’s enthusiasm for language learning that helps her write effectively contrasts strongly with her indifference to the spelling list.

The contrast I detect here in Ella is evident throughout the research. Much of the children’s discussion is about the “doing” of literacy, rather than the making of meaning. They talk of the *“year 5 and 6 spelling appendix”*; of what people “ought” to be able to spell at different ages; of tests, scores and mock-SATs; of having to write a given number of *“FAD”* (fronted adverbial) sentences for their homework; of racing the clock to achieve a certain quantity of work:

*you get like ten minutes to do like 4 pages of A4 paper, like very very good, like, description and yeah and you only get like ten minutes otherwise you have to like stay in at lunch.*

The children distinguish between *“reading for your reading record”* and *“reading for fun”*. All discuss their hatred of reading aloud to an adult, which they interpret purely as a mechanism to ensure they read the entire book. Ella describes reading in a deliberately robotic manner in the hope of being left alone to read for herself: *“When I was reading I was like [monotonous voice] ‘do do do dooo do do do dooo,’ and then [my mum] just gets fed up with me so I get to go off on my own and read”*. Others talk of skipping pages when their parent’s attention wanders. However, when it comes to using language to communicate in real contexts, for real purposes and audiences, a different picture emerges. Like Ella, the other children are avid users of literacies at home, writing stories and songs, mining the internet for information, and keeping in touch with friends and family via social media. On one occasion during the research, following discussion of recent news reports about Donald Trump, some of the children decide to write to him<sup>6</sup> to ask a number of questions. On this occasion, they seek help with spelling and punctuation, and discuss the level of formality and structures they should use to communicate with a public figure. This suggests, then, that children will actively seek out technical knowledge when communicating for a real purpose and to an audience. There was little evidence in the research, however, that the children are similarly inspired by the GPS curriculum; instead it seems that they are motivated extrinsically, by test scores as currency for *“getting into a better school”*, by teacher praise, peer recognition as “clever” and so on.

Having discussed some observations about the children’s attitudes to GPS, I turn now to classroom practice and part of a story-writing lesson I observed during my field work. I illustrate this with a short vignette, a piece of ‘creative non-fiction’ (Sparkes, 2002, p.153) intended as a ‘window’ (Humphreys, 2005, p.842) into a small part of the activity of a classroom on one particular occasion. Of course windows have frames, and this one, while written from detailed fieldnotes and transcriptions of dialogue, is framed from my point of

view. I do not claim, then, that this is a typical literacy lesson. However, I suspect many teachers would recognise some of the practices, tensions and compromises the vignette portrays.

### **“Don’t forget your success criteria” (Pat, year 4 teacher)**

I’m spending a day researching and acting as a teaching assistant in Pat’s year 4 class. It’s about 20 minutes until break time. Pat is addressing the children. “I’m going to give you all another fifteen minutes to finish your writing and I expect you to work without talking. And don’t forget your success criteria. Who’s actually looked at their success criteria this lesson?”

A few hands go up.

“Yes, not many. That’s what I thought. Mrs Wright doesn’t just stick those into your books for fun you know. I want to see them highlighted by the end of the lesson.”

The children hesitate, gauge that she’s finished, and continue with their writing.

Maisie asks if she can read me what she has written. She seems proud of it. She takes a deep breath, reads in a mysterious whisper. “‘A shower of cool air washes over me. I can breathe again after the blazing heat outside. It’s like a dark, silent cave in here. I stretch my hands out in front of me, but I can’t even see them. It feels like nobody has been here for a million years.’ Is that how you spell million, or is it one L?” She passes me the book.

Above Maisie’s rounded, handwriting is a typed slip of paper.

WALT write a story about a pyramid exploration.

Success Criteria:

- I use a variety of fronted adverbials to start my sentences.
- I use powerful adjectives and adverbs.
- I can use all the Year 4 punctuation, including commas after fronted adverbials.

Maisie has highlighted all the bullet points in green, a code that means ‘success criteria achieved’.

Pat claps a short rhythm. A few children clap it back to her, and the class gradually becomes quiet.

“Thank you, Shakespeare Class. Now, let’s see how you’ve been getting on. Put your hand up if you’ve highlighted your success criteria.”



Alfie's right hand goes up. With his left he grabs a green neon pen and highlights all three lines.

Pat wants to check the children have used fronted adverbials. "Who'd like to read me their work? Maisie? Right, just read me the first word of your first six sentences. In a nice loud voice so everyone can hear."

"A shower of cool air" —

"Just the first word of each sentence, Maisie, not the whole sentence, just the first word."

"Um... A... I... It's... I... erm... It."

"So, have you used any fronted adverbials, Maisie? Has she used any?" Pat taps a wall display entitled 'Which fronted adverbial?'.

"No? No, I don't think you have, have you? What are the different kinds of fronted adverbial Maisie could have used? Remember, everyone, it's one of our year 4 targets, to use fronted adverbials. Come on, we've been doing this all week. Yes, Chloe? Yes, Time. What else? Place, yes? Any others? How about Manner? Can you think of something you could have used, Maisie?"

Maisie frowns. "Cautiously?"

"Cautiously, lovely. And what are you going to put after it? A comma, that's right. Who else? Liam, what have you got?

In this vignette we see some ways in which, having been conceived for and made official in the 2013 programmes of study for English<sup>7</sup>, the term "fronted" adverbial and its related concepts now permeate classroom teaching, discourse, time and spaces (see Rosen, 2016 for a discussion of the term).

Having spent a week teaching fronted adverbials, Pat is now encouraging the children to apply them in story-writing. She does this through a variety of strategies; verbal, material and affective, all taken-for-granted elements of many primary school teachers' repertoires. She emphasises repeatedly, for example, that fronted adverbials are a serious matter, a year 4 target which the children must achieve to meet age-related expectations – and implicit in this of course is the possibility of failing, the shame of being "behind". Pat hints that fronted adverbials are worth both the hours devoted to learning about them in class and the time Mrs Wright has spent sticking success criteria into the children's books. Fronted adverbials are made manifest in the classroom in various ways and on different time scales. Written targets phrased as "I can" statements often last an entire school year. Children are supposed to know their targets and are held accountable for meeting them; they are displayed in their exercise books and on wall displays and communicated to parents. "Working" wall displays, such as the one Pat refers to in the vignette, last for the duration of a unit of learning, in this case

providing visual reminders of different types of fronted adverbial, with examples. Success criteria for individual pieces of work are pasted into the children's exercise books (and again, the word "success" holds within it the possibility of failure).

Pat also requires material evidence that the children have consciously used fronted adverbials, by asking them to highlight their success criteria – although Alfie's reaction may reflect unthinking compliance rather than genuine engagement. Pat also praises children's responses with the words "lovely" and "that's right". Supported by a warm tone of voice and a smile, these are powerful incentives for the children to earn approval and contribute to a more pleasurable classroom experience. The cumulative effect of all these strategies, then, is to focus the children's attention on fronted adverbials, as the single most important aspect of the work of these children this morning. Over time such mechanisms have become routine in the classroom. It must not be forgotten, however, that underlying many of them is the school's – and therefore each teacher's – accountability for the outcomes of the children in a class, as measured by tests that track their progress up to the all-important year 6 SATs, including the GPS test.

While none of these strategies are exclusive to the GPS curriculum, what is troubling here is the ways in which the requirements of the GPS test have been incorporated into mechanisms of accountability and interwoven into teaching and learning, to the extent that they have distorted what is considered important in the activity of writing. In the "plenary" part of the lesson, for example, Pat is teaching the children to include fronted adverbials without considering their appropriateness or function in this context. By interrupting Maisie as she tries to read her entire paragraph, demanding that she read only the first word of each sentence, and asking the other children to comment on the effectiveness of Maisie's work, Pat demonstrates both a startling disregard for the content and meaning of the writing as a whole, and a disrespect towards the child as a meaning-maker. She seems to care only that Maisie has included the requisite grammatical features. The suggestion she elicits from Maisie – the word "cautiously" – spoils the rhythm of the child's evocative writing. Thus Pat is also conditioning the children to believe that, provided they can sprinkle their writing with the grammatical feature of the day and use correct punctuation, they are recognised in this classroom as successful writers, whether or not their writing is meaningful. As Rosen (2017) argues: 'instead of showing children that the structure of language should fit its purpose, the Key Stage 2 requirements put it the other way round: take a structure and shoehorn it in'. Writing stories here is not about plot, character, atmosphere or meaning; it is simply about satisfying requirements. All this effectively severs the writers from the creative task of making stylistic choices for a particular audience and purpose. It dehumanises the entire process and renders it formulaic and meaningless. It also encourages the children to "tick off" grammatical features in their reading, as I also witnessed during the research, on an occasion when I used a storybook as a prompt for discussion. Much of the children's reaction to the book concerned a perceived lack of "good adjectives", rather than responding to the content of the story and pictures or talking about how it made them feel.

**“I am only aloud out [...] but only with an adult” (Jessie, age 10)**

hill ↓

“I’m trapped because to get to town you have to go up then down a really steep right next to a really busy road even when you get to the bottom you have a really long walk. I like living on the ↓ is full [military] base because it of people that have had the same experiences as me also most of my friends live there. I am only aloud out of the base but only with an adult.” (from Jessie’s writing).

This final piece of data is a snippet of writing by 10 year-old Jessie, another of my research participants. One of a cohort of children who have been taught GPS throughout Key Stages 1 and 2, Jessie is proud of her high scores in the GPS paper and is described as the “*cleverest in the class*” by the other children in my research group. We might expect her, then, to be able to ‘spell, punctuate and write a grammatical sentence’ (Gove, 2010). In the GPS curriculum, children learn that a sentence must have a subject and a verb, which they must identify in sentences in the test. They are also required to place punctuation marks, including semi-colons, into given sentences. It is somewhat surprising, then, that this piece of writing suggests Jessie does not routinely apply these skills to her own writing, as we see in the first two sentences above. This is despite some evidence that she has edited this piece. Had she been taught to “hear” the cadences of sentences – something that comes through time devoted to reading, analysing and playing around with well-written prose – and learned to read her own writing critically, she might have developed a sense of where sentences conventionally end. She might also have noticed the extraneous words in her third sentence. Her misspelling of the word “aloud” also suggests she has learned decontextualised lists of homophones without attention to their meanings. The spelling of these homophones makes sense when children consider the semantic links between aloud and loud, allow and allowed.

Without attempting to generalise from an isolated piece of writing from one child, though there were plenty more I could have used, there is no evidence here that a diet of GPS has enabled Jessie to write with the kind of grammatical accuracy envisaged by the designers of the curriculum and test. Rather than continue with the GPS curriculum unchecked – which amounts to little more than an experiment in pedagogy – an interesting and productive line of enquiry could be a detailed investigation of children’s writing in the context of the GPS curriculum, in combination with ethnographic work in the classroom.

## **Conclusion**

These pieces of ethnographic evidence support the argument made by Myhill and her colleagues that, under the current testing regime,

children are being encouraged to view writing as an enterprise which requires the inclusion of certain grammatical features: repeatedly, children are advised to ‘put in’ fronted adverbials, or relative clauses with no consideration of relevance or appropriacy’ (Centre for Research in Writing, 2016).

All this, I believe, is an unhappy consequence of a system in which children are taught decontextualised elements of grammar and asked to supply evidence that they can use them, in order to satisfy the demands of an all-encompassing accountability machine.

I do not argue here that teaching spelling, punctuation and grammar is unnecessary. I believe strongly that it is in children's interests to be able to use language interestingly and effectively. They should understand and master the varieties of language available, including those that hold currency in a given society (Freire, 2005), and be able to talk about the linguistic choices they make. Neither do I claim that it is impossible to teach the technical aspects of writing creatively, within a holistic, flexible approach to meaning-making. What my research shows, however, is that some of the fears expressed by the head teachers in 2012 have been realised in some settings. The accountability system rewards schools whose children score highly on tests. Children cannot score highly in the GPS test that requires them to deal with 'bizarre, context-free spurt[s] of language' (Rosen, 2018) unless they have learned to do just that. And this takes time and effort away from children learning how to become creative and effective meaning-makers in a real world where more reading and writing goes on (Kalantzis & Cope, 2015), by more people, and in different ways, than ever before.

### **Acknowledgements**

Claire thanks her PhD supervisors Dr Frances Giampapa and Dr Helen Manchester for their support, Dr Patrick Yarker for his helpful comments on this article and her funders, the Economic and Social Research Council.

### **Notes**

[1] Material developed by the Standards and Testing Agency for 2019 national curriculum assessments and licensed under Open Government Licence v3.0

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/>

[2] All proper names used here are pseudonyms

[3] See Grammar for Writing (Department for Education and Employment, 2000)

[4] For full marks in the 2019 test, children must know all the following terms and related concepts: antonym, synonym, determiner, preposition, noun, noun phrase, pronoun, possessive pronoun, adjective, subordinate clause, relative clause, conjunction, coordinating conjunction, adverb, adverbial, simple past, modal verb, passive; and a range of punctuation terms.

[5] These are sentences with three elements, the first of which is used to make a statement and the other two to provide further detail. Ella's example was: "The forest was scary: an owl hooted; the trees creaked."

[6] Unfortunately Trump did not reply. Two of the children wrote to the Queen instead, and were delighted to receive replies.

[7] A Lexis Nexis newspaper search for the term "fronted AND adverbials" finds 117 results, which all occur since 2012, coinciding with the beginning of preparation for the first GPS test in 2013.

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